

The University of Chicago

JOSHUA L. WILSON, FRONTIER
CONTROVERSIALIST

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED
TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY
SCHOOL IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE
OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF CHURCH HISTORY
1933

By
RAYMOND LEE HIGHTOWER

Private Edition, Distributed by
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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

Reprinted from
CHURCH HISTORY
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JOSHUA L. WILSON, FRONTIER CONTROVERSIALIST

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Among the frontier ministers who contended "earnestly for the faith once delivered," Joshua L. Wilson stands well to the front.¹ He was born in Bedford County, Virginia, Sept. 22, 1774; and died in Cincinnati, Ohio, August 14, 1846. His father was Henry Wright Wilson, a grandson of Major Josiah Wilson of Maryland. His mother was an elder sister of Drury Lacy, a well-known Presbyterian minister of Virginia. Wilson's father married Agnes Lacy in Chesterfield County, Virginia, on April 7, 1765. Joshua was the third child and second son. At the time of his birth the family had moved to Bedford County, where Henry Wright Wilson practiced his profession of physician. His career was cut off by death when Joshua was about four years old, and the family was left in needy circumstances. Wilson tells us in his Memoirs that his mother soon married again "with a hope of obtaining a better home."² Her second husband was John Templin, an elderly Presbyterian farmer of the neighborhood. He was living with his only son by a former marriage, Terah. The latter was probably the first Presbyterian to preach the Gospel in Kentucky. After he lost his fiancée by an early death, his father and David Rice, his minister in Bedford County, persuaded him to study for the ministry. At the time of Wilson's birth David Rice was preaching near his home, and Terah Templin was preparing to become a minister.³ Although his mother was a Baptist, the religious atmosphere thrown about Wilson was Presbyterian.

1 The Joshua L. Wilson Papers constitute a part of the Durrett Collection deposited in the libraries of the University of Chicago. They contain about two thousand manuscripts relating to the life of Wilson. Nearly half are letters written by Wilson or to Wilson. Parts of Wilson's diary, journal, memoranda, sermon notes, expense accounts, memoirs, etc., make up the remainder of the material.

2 MS. of Wilson's Memoirs. Joshua L. Wilson Papers.

3 R. H. Bishop, *An Outline of the History of the Church in the State of Kentucky, During a Period of Forty Years: Containing the Memoirs of Rev. David Rice*, Lexington, Ky., 1824, p. 61. Also MS. of Wilson's Memoirs.

Shortly after his marriage to Wilson's mother, John Templin decided to move to Kentucky. He took his new family as far as the neighborhood of Abingdon, Virginia, where they were left while he, his son Terah, and his one negro slave, pushed into Kentucky to find another home. The severity of the winter of 1779-80 brought the adventurers hardships both in the form of bodily suffering and in the loss of their live stock. They eventually found shelter in a fortified settlement, and Terah Templin visited other stations—as such places were called—for the purpose of preaching. In the meantime Wilson's mother "obtained subsistence" for her three children by taking in knitting and teaching a small school. At this early date Joshua was beginning to get acquainted with the family library, which consisted of a 1754 Edinburgh edition of the Bible, a *Shorter Catechism* and a copy of Watts' *Hymnal*. In 1781 John Templin sent his son to bring the family into Kentucky, where they arrived in October of that year.

For about twelve years the family lived on leased land, from which they managed to gain a living. During this period John Templin died, thus shifting the care of the family first to Terah Templin and then to the Wilson boys. Joshua's older brother spent much of his time in the Indian wars so that responsibility was placed upon Joshua at an early age. While yet in his teens he purchased a small farm north of the Kentucky River in Jessamine County, then a part of Fayette. His sister married and he was left alone with his mother. He worked hard and soon succeeded in paying for the place.

Young Wilson was sensitive to his religious environment. He heard much about the Bible in his home, and as a small boy he used to go into the woods to pray over his wants and fears. When he was between ten and eleven, a revival in the community brought him a "conviction of sin," but the delay in the acceptance of his application for church membership gave opportunity for the religious enthusiasm to cool. Several years later, when he was working away from home, he read *Pilgrim's Progress* and resolved to be a Christian; when he got back to his old friends he resumed his former habits. He tells us that he swore, played cards, danced, sang popular songs, and attended horse races and shooting matches.⁴ He was not addicted to drink because he did not like the taste of whiskey. He had entered the twenty-second year of his life before he came to

⁴ MS. of Wilson's Memoirs.

a definite decision to become a Christian and prepare for the ministry. According to his own account, the "conviction of sin" again came upon him as he was returning home after an absence of several days at a lively party. Following Terah Templin's advice, he decided to enter a school. He sold his farm to a German immigrant, sent his mother to live with her daughter, and went for a year to the Kentucky Academy located at Pisgah.⁵ Rev. James Blythe was pastor of the Presbyterian congregation at that place. Under date of April 14, 1796, he signed the following document:

Let this certify that Joshua L. Wilson lived some time in this congregation, was admitted to full communion with us, and now leaves us free from any cause of church censure known to us, and is hereby recommended to any society where God may cast his Lot.⁶

The following year Wilson and three other young men attended a private school in Mercer County taught by the Rev. William Mahon, whom Wilson characterized an "an able teacher and a drunken preacher."⁷

After less than three years of formal education, Wilson became a teacher of a school in Frankfort, "containing the children of some of the most distinguished families at the seat of government." Here he fell in with "wild company" and became involved in debt. He made up his mind to devote his spare time to the study of law, but his ambitions were cut short by a spell of severe illness. While he was recovering, he again decided to enter the ministry. The young Scotch preacher, Archibald Cameron, gave him some "seasonable counsel" that sent him to "read divinity" under the Rev. James Vance, who lived near Louisville. He supported himself at this time by assisting Vance in his classical school and teaching vocal music. While thus employed he was received into the Transylvania Presbytery as a candidate for the ministry, and a year and a half later, in 1802, he was licensed to preach. He married Sarah Mackay, the only daughter of George Mackay, on October 22, 1801. In the spring of 1803 he began preaching to

⁵ In 1795 David Rice and James Blythe raised funds for the school. George Washington and John Adams each contributed one hundred dollars, and Aaron Burr fifty dollars, for its maintenance. See R. Davidson, *History of the Presbyterian Church in the State of Kentucky*, New York, 1847, pp. 123-25.

⁶ MS. among the Joshua L. Wilson Papers.

⁷ Mahon was finally deposed from the ministry on account of intoxication. MS. Minutes of Transylvania Presbytery, October 2, 1804, at the Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Louisville, Ky.

the congregations at Bardstown and Big Spring. On June 8, 1804, he was ordained and installed over these churches, and continued to minister to them until 1808. In the latter year a friend informed him that the Presbyterian Church in Cincinnati desired a minister and recommended that he seek the position. Wilson was anxious to leave Bardstown because the subscriptions to his salary were falling off, and in spite of the fact that he taught school and tilled his own garden in an effort to meet his expenses, he was heavily in debt. He visited Cincinnati in March, 1808, and moved his family to the new location in May of the same year. Here he began a ministry that continued for a period of thirty-eight years—until his death.

Cincinnati was the most important settlement in that section of southeast Ohio between the Great and Little Miami Rivers known as the Miami Purchase, or the Symmes Purchase—after John Cleves Symmes of New Jersey, who purchased the region from the United States Government. The site on which Cincinnati was to be located was bought from Symmes by Matthias Denman of New Jersey, who associated with himself two equal partners and began the settlement in the latter days of December, 1788. Certain lots were set aside for religious purposes; since the denomination most numerously represented was the Presbyterian the first church to be established was of that communion. *The Register of the United Congregations of Cincinnati and Columbia* shows that, "In October, 1790, the Rev. David Rice, of Transylvania Presbytery, Kentucky, visited Cincinnati and Columbia, and before his return, constituted a church."⁸ The church had only eight members when organized, but the next year one of Rice's students, James Kemper, was ordered by Presbytery to "supply in the settlements of the Miami at discretion."⁹ On October 23, 1792, Kemper was ordained in Cincinnati's newly erected meeting-house, at the first session of Presbytery held north of the Ohio. He continued his charge until the fall of 1796. With his resignation, the Cincinnati congregation began to maintain a separate existence. From this time until the coming of Wilson the church was served by several ministers. The revival during the first years

⁸ MS. in possession of Pleasant Ridge Presbyterian Church, Cincinnati, Ohio. Columbia was settled by Benjamin Stites at the mouth of the Little Miami in November, 1788. It was the first settlement in the Symmes Purchase.

⁹ MS. Minutes of the Presbytery of Transylvania, April 27, 1791.

of the new century brought contention into the congregation, and for a while there were rival parties within the church. In 1808 the one other organized religious body in Cincinnati besides the Presbyterians was the Methodists, who formed a society in 1804 and built a chapel in 1806.

Before Wilson went to Cincinnati he had already won distinction as a young man with a "vigorous and inquiring mind" and as a contender for the truth. At Frankfort he opposed the deists and entered into a newspaper controversy with them over the observance of the Sabbath. His enemies at one time threatened his life and he carried a gun for defense.¹⁰ At Bardstown the "infidels and dissolute persons" destroyed his place of worship in a shady grove near the village. Wilson not only was active against the admirers of Tom Paine and Thomas Jefferson, and adherents of deism in general, but also was opposed to the movement within his own denomination to license men for the ministry who had not acquired a knowledge of Greek and Latin. He himself attained a sufficient mastery of these languages to instruct and examine others in them. It was a source of chagrin to him that several men who made no profession of classical learning were licensed to preach at the same time as he. Being appointed a member of the Kentucky Synod's commission in 1805 to "adjudicate" upon the irregular proceedings of the Cumberland Presbytery in permitting untrained men to enter the ministry he used his power to bring about the dissolution of that Presbytery. It was known to his fellow ministers when he went to Cincinnati that he would be opposed to the New Light or revival movement in Ohio. The followers and friends of Barton W. Stone had been numerous in that section and many, under the persuasion of Richard McNemar, had gone over to the Shakers. But when Wilson arrived, he found a party of Old Calvinists ready to follow his leadership.

Wilson was called to the Cincinnati congregation by annual appointment instead of being settled as permanent pastor. He began on a salary of \$350, but the amount was increased gradually until the subscription was finally as high as \$1800. For the first three and a half years he found the people of this town of about two thousand inhabitants "uncommonly moral." During this time he was making an effort to adjust himself and enter into the community life. He became known as a

¹⁰ MS. of Wilson's Memoirs.

man of "great energy and decision of character."¹¹ But his inflexible firmness led some to regard his manner as "imperious and overbearing."¹² The *Cincinnati Directory* for 1819 shows that he was secretary of the Miami Bible Society, president of the Tract Society, and president of the Union Sabbath School Society. He had become interested in education and was instrumental in the founding of a Lancastrian Seminary in the town.¹³ For several years after the establishment of Cincinnati College in 1819, he was professor of moral philosophy and logic in that institution. For this service he received no salary, but was honored by the college in 1823 with the degree of Doctor of Divinity. With all of his activities and responsibilities Wilson preached regularly in Cincinnati and frequently in the surrounding country. Although he seldom wrote out his discourses, he made careful notes for most of his public addresses. His unquestioned honesty led to his appointment as treasurer of the county in 1814, and five years later to his being chosen to fill out the term of the city treasurer when the latter proved to be a defaulter.¹⁴ There is no evidence that Wilson's participation in the civic and cultural life of the growing Western center ever led him to question his calling as a minister; he was always the minister of the "glorious gospel." It was in this capacity that he served for more than a decade as chaplain in the Ohio militia. He wrote in his diary for Monday, October 3, 1825, as follows:

Since Friday I have preached 4 sermons, delivered 5 sacramental and 2 funeral addresses and visited 8 families in affliction besides attending to the business of the session and my own family.

Wilson became the father of eight children, four sons and four daughters. Of these all but two sons and one daughter preceded him to the grave. Suffering and death brought grief into his home, but no family strife ever threatened to disrupt it. There was harmony between Wilson and his wife. Together they undertook to guide their children "in the ways of

11 E. D. Mansfield, *Memoirs of the Life and Services of Daniel Drake, M. D.*, Cincinnati, 1855, pp. 236-37.

12 Archibald Cameron to J. L. W., March 6, 1815. Unless otherwise stated, letters cited are among the Joshua L. Wilson Papers.

13 A plan of instruction devised by Joseph Lancaster. See L. C. Weigle, *American Idealism*, p. 274. *Pageant of America Series*, vol. X. New Haven, 1928.

14 Certificate of appointment as county treasurer contained among the Joshua L. Wilson Papers. See also H. A., and Kate B. Ford, *History of Cincinnati*, Cincinnati, 1881, p. 73.

the Lord." While the young did not always follow the precepts of their elders, it is interesting to know that of the three who survived their father one son was a Presbyterian minister, the other a Christian physician, and the only daughter married a minister of her father's church.

In the world in which Joshua L. Wilson lived there was a constant struggle in process between truth and error, good and evil, between the elect and the damned. Controversy was the proper means by which to ascertain the truth. He noted in his Memoirs that "almost all that a public teacher speaks or writes is controversy—is disputation for or against the truth." Elsewhere he recorded that neither eloquence, poetry, nor music was as rejoicing "to the heart of a sincere inquirer after truth as down right controversy."¹⁵ In 1829 he made the following remarks in the columns of his religious newspaper:

In our apprehension, controversy consists in a clear statement of facts—in a fair application of proofs and illustrations—in logical arguments—in legitimate inferences—and all this to exhibit truth, overturn error, promote the glory of God and the peace, purity and happiness of men. These are exercises of which a good man can never be sick—in which he is commanded never to be weary.¹⁶

The first of the major controversies into which Wilson entered during his long ministry at Cincinnati was one with the Methodists in 1811. Some years earlier the Presbyterians and Methodists had begun a pamphlet warfare with each other in Kentucky. While the Western Annual Conference was in session at Cincinnati in 1811, several of the younger preachers, including Peter Cartwright, had printed anonymously a piece of satiric doggerel, entitled, *The Dagon of Calvinism or the Moloch of Decrees, A Poem in Three Cantos*. Wilson was in bed with rheumatism when some sheets of the "detestable book" were brought to him. He says that "no electricity nor Galvanic battery could have started man from his bed quicker nor kept him up longer" than this "poem." He learned the name of the publishing firm which printed the book but could not find out the names of the sponsors. Therefore he presented charges to the Methodist leaders of the town against one of their number who was a member of the firm. As he could not get the satisfaction he demanded, he prepared a reply to the pamphlet. He entitled his publication *Episcopal Methodism; or*

¹⁵ *Episcopal Methodism; or Dagonism Exhibited*, Cincinnati, 1811, pp. 8-9.

¹⁶ *The Pandect*. Cincinnati, February 10, 1829.

Dagonism Exhibited. He attacked the Methodist doctrine and polity, pointing out that the "decrees of God" were the great object of contempt of that denomination while the articles of the Calvinistic faith were "the living oracles of God." Several replies were made to Wilson's pamphlet, the most significant probably being that of William Burke of Cincinnati in a work with the lengthy title, *The Methodist Episcopal Church, Their Doctrines and Discipline, Together with the Characters of Certain Individuals, Vindicated from the Unjust Representations of Joshua L. Wilson*.¹⁷ The Presbyterian periodical, *The Evangelical Record and Western Review*, gave extensive reviews to both Wilson's and Burke's pamphlets, and the controversy was waged in Kentucky for several years.¹⁸ Wilson requested a friend to

. . . . pray for me that my strength may be equal to my day. I am surrounded by a host of enemies—Infidels and Arminians who act in Co. No less than 10 Methodist preachers live in Cincinnati! But great is truth and must prevail tho' hand join in hand against it. For all that I have thought, spoken, written, or acted amiss may I lie humble, abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes. But if I am even cast down to the dust I shall not be in despair.¹⁹

Ten years later he said that it would be time enough for him to write another book against the Methodists when he learned to rule his own spirit.²⁰ This does not mean that Wilson regretted his behavior as a controversialist; he was sorry only for having lost his temper. Near the end of his life he said that he had found the Methodists consistent in nothing but opposition to the truth as revealed in the Bible.²¹

Scarcely had the controversy with the Methodists subsided when a dissenting party arose within Wilson's own church. A man named John Kelso joined the church in May, 1813, upon a certificate issued by the Indian Creek congregation of Kentucky. He associated with himself a man named John Smith, from New York, who was not a member of the church, but who attended the meetings of the Thursday Evening Society. Together they took issue with Wilson on his explanation of the Bible, and the controversy became so heated that the session of the church finally suspended the meetings. Kelso gathered

¹⁷ Cincinnati, 1832.

¹⁸ *The Evangelical Record and Western Review* was edited by James Blythe and John P. Campbell, and published in Lexington, Ky., in 1812-13.

¹⁹ J. L. W. to J. P. Campbell, April 3, 1812.

²⁰ J. L. W. to S. D. Hoge, June 22, 1822

²¹ MS of Wilson's Memoirs.

about himself other men within the church and endeavored to put Wilson out. The latter made the counter move of bringing charges before the session against the five leaders of the opposing party. They were accused of schism and slander and cited to appear for a hearing. Instead of complying with the order, they denominated themselves the Second Presbyterian Church of Cincinnati and held a public meeting on September 4, 1814. When they applied to Miami Presbytery for recognition, Wilson appeared against them in behalf of the session of the First Church. The matter was appealed to the Synod of Ohio and the discordant group was returned to the mother church. But the difference between Wilson and the session on the one side and the seceders on the other was so great that they again attempted to form a second church. In 1817 the controversy was carried up to the General Assembly, but the lack of certain documents which had been employed in the second appeal before the Synod caused the case to go "against the Session," and the Second Presbyterian Church of Cincinnati came into official existence. It carried on a precarious struggle for survival until Lyman Beecher came to Cincinnati in 1832.

In Wilson's opinion the Second Church was not organized according to the Presbyterian Form of Government. He opposed what he termed "innovations" in the Presbyterian Church and prided himself on being "a Calvinist of the Old School." When James Kemper returned to Ohio in 1814 and began to preach without transferring his membership from West Lexington Presbytery in Kentucky to Miami Presbytery, Wilson laid charges against him before the presbytery to which Kemper belonged because he considered it his duty as a minister to censure his fellow-presbyters for occasional disorders "arising from the manner in which they may discharge their important office."²² This led to an estrangement between Kemper and Wilson which lasted for several years.

Another minister of his own faith against whom Wilson brought charges was the Rev. William Arthur. He was a native of Scotland who, after a ministry in Pennsylvania, moved to Cincinnati. Beginning in 1820 he was permitted to deliver Sunday evening lectures in the First Church. These continued for more than a year, when it was decided by the session that if allowed to go on, the lectures were "calculated to produce

²² J. L. W. to the "Moderator and members of the West Lexington Presbytery," March 29, 1815.

some inconvenience," and Arthur was requested to "desist from occupying said pulpit." Arthur held the "Moderator of the session . . . responsible," and wrote a pamphlet concerning the affair entitled *Animadversions on Some Recent Occurrences in the Presbyterian Churches of Cincinnati*,²³ in which Wilson was rather severely arraigned. Wilson, in his turn, proceeded against Arthur in the manner prescribed by Scripture and the Presbyterian *Book of Discipline*—according to Matt. 18:15-16. First he visited Arthur, and not gaining satisfaction in this way, he took three others with him for a second conversation on the subject of their differences. No conciliation being effected, Wilson presented charges of slander before the presbytery. Arthur appealed to the General Assembly in 1822, but Wilson's charges were sustained and Arthur ordered to submit to rebuke by the presbytery. At this juncture Wilson intervened and a peaceable settlement was concluded. Four years later he made the following record of the case:

The offense of Mr. Arthur was comparatively small. It was committed against a brother in a season of prejudice and warmth and was easily removed by the restoration of calmness and Christian feeling.²⁴

In 1825 Wilson was instrumental in bringing about the deposition of Dr. James Welsh when he refused to appear before the presbytery to answer charges of "drunkenness, unfair dealing and neglect of ministerial duty." Welsh died not long afterwards and Wilson was accused of having hastened the death by his part in the prosecution, but he wrote in his diary, "Sweet is a good conscience! I never felt it more so."²⁵ He thought Welsh had "driven hard after the world," and this he opposed. Wilson also spoke and wrote against dancing and the theatre as being "worldly." So persistent were his attacks upon the supporters of theatrical performances in Cincinnati that at one Fourth of July celebration someone drank the following toast: "The Cincinnati Theatre—May it not, like the walls of Jericho, fall at the sound of Joshua's horn."²⁶

Although neither the First Presbyterian Church of Cincinnati nor its minister was dependent upon Eastern missionaries, Wilson was known to be favorable to missionary activity, and

²³ Cincinnati, 1821.

²⁴ MS. of the "Ecclesiastical History of Cincinnati Presbytery," 1826. Joshua L. Wilson Papers.

²⁵ Thursday, November 24, 1825.

²⁶ Ford, *op. cit.*, p. 396.

the Eastern societies relied upon his assistance when they sent men to the West. But as early as 1817 Wilson began to think of the possibility of a Western General Assembly.²⁷ In 1830 he argued in behalf of this project and sought to bring about such a division in the church as would make one Assembly of the Mississippi Valley territory. He maintained that the West could not be represented in the Assembly which convened annually at Philadelphia. Wilson's proposal came too late, for already the Presbyterian Church was being divided into two schools—the Old and the New. The Old School held to Old Calvinism, was generally favorable toward Princeton Theological Seminary, and desired that the western missionary activities of the church be conducted by the Board of Missions of the General Assembly. The New School emphasized the freedom of the individual, inclined toward the "Yale theology," and supported the American Home Missionary Society as the better organization to conduct western missions. This society was formed in 1826 with headquarters in New York. While at the beginning it was predominantly Presbyterian, it had a minority of members of the Congregational, Dutch Reformed, and Associate Reformed churches. Under the "Plan of Union"²⁸ it aided both the Presbyterian and Congregational churches. Soon it was a competitor for the western mission field. The question of a policy for missions in the west came before the General Assembly in 1829 but each individual church was left to decide which organization it would support. Wilson's first position was that the two organizations should combine their work in the west. A proposal with this in view was put forth also by the corresponding secretary of the American Home Missionary Society, but it was not acceptable to the Assembly's Board. Both groups sought the favor of Wilson.²⁹ When he became convinced that a union of the two in the west could not be expected, he chose to cooperate with the Assembly's Board on the ground that missions should be conducted by the church functioning as a missionary organization and not by voluntary

27 Archibald Cameron to J. L. W., September 23, 1817.

28 Adopted in 1801 by the General Assembly and the Connecticut General Association, and later by other General Associations. By its terms both Presbyterian and Congregational missionaries could minister to churches of either denomination. See W. Walker, *A History of the Congregational Churches in the United States*, pp. 316-17. *American Church History Series*, vol. III. New York, 1894.

29 James Blythe to J. L. W., April 23, 1830. Absalom Peters to J. L. W., November 9, 1830.

associations.³⁰ Early in 1831 he delivered and had published his first address against the American Home Missionary Society. From this time until the expulsion of the Society from the Old School, with the division of the Presbyterian church, he opposed it in sermons and pamphlets because it was "aiming to overthrow the Presbyterian Church."

In Cincinnati and its environs Wilson became the leader of the Old School. He began a weekly publication in 1828, called *The Pandect*, for the purpose of setting forth Calvinistic doctrines. After this paper passed out of his hands, in the following year, he came to see the necessity of another Old School organ to thwart the New School aggressions; *The Pandect* had become a New School paper under the name of *The Cincinnati Journal*. In 1831 Wilson obtained the assistance of Old School friends to begin the publication of *The Standard*. The ordination of the editor of *The Cincinnati Journal* during the same year, in the face of Old School opposition, led Wilson to publish a series of articles on "Mr. Blanchard's Case." *The Standard* also printed information exposing the character of the New School minister, the Rev. Asa Mahan, who had come to Cincinnati from the Presbytery of Rochester. Wilson's attacks in *The Standard* resulted in the New School bringing charges against him before the presbytery. When Cincinnati Presbytery met in September, 1832, there were three cases against Wilson. He appealed to the synod, which endeavored to quiet the controversialists by a compromise. But Wilson was seeking "the purity" of the church and would not be silenced.

When the General Assembly of 1827 voted to establish the Western Theological Seminary near Pittsburgh rather than near Cincinnati, it was done against the wishes of Wilson and his party who had contended for the latter location. This decision, however, did not cause them to give up the idea of a seminary in the Cincinnati area. As the Baptists were unable to raise funds to meet the stipulations that went with an offer of \$4,000 by the Lane brothers for beginning a theological school, the proposition was taken up by the Presbyterians in 1828. Wilson was chairman of the board of trustees which attempted with little success to raise additional funds for the new seminary. Finally in the fall of 1830, a New School member of the board, Rev. F. Y. Vail, agreed to return to the East

³⁰ R. Cushman to Absalom Peters, December 17, 1830. The American Home Missionary Society Correspondence, at the Chicago Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois.

in an effort to raise money and procure a president for the institution. Contributions were obtained on the condition that Lyman Beecher, pastor of a Congregational church in Boston, accept the position of president and professor of theology. His work in the east prevented his immediate journey to the west, but when he did arrive in 1832 he found Wilson opposed to his interpretations of the church's doctrines and polity. When Beecher was invited to Cincinnati in 1830 there was still hope of union in the missionary work of the west and of cooperation between the two Schools in founding a "Princeton of the West." By the time Beecher arrived in Cincinnati the hope had passed away. Wilson had resigned from the board of trustees of Lane, and the two men stood in opposing camps.

Finding himself in the minority party of his presbytery, Wilson was not anxious to place charges against Beecher on his own responsibility; he first tried to prevail upon the presbytery to make an investigation of Beecher's beliefs. This method of procedure being refused him, he began formal prosecution in November, 1834, by charging Beecher with heresy, hypocrisy, and slander. The trial was carried from the presbytery to the synod, where Beecher was "admonished to be more guarded in future." Beecher acquiesced in the decision of the synod, and was requested to publish "in pamphlet form" certain of his theological views "agreeably to his declarations and explanations made before the synod."³¹ From the mild course of the Synod of Cincinnati Wilson appealed to the General Assembly. He claimed that Beecher was not constitutionally a member of the Presbyterian Church, since before coming to Cincinnati Beecher had joined the Third Presbytery of New York without attending its meeting or expecting to reside within its bounds, and the course of the presbytery was disapproved by the Synod of New York. When the Assembly of 1836 convened, however, it was controlled by a New School majority. As the case of Albert Barnes was similar to that of Beecher, "at the earnest request of many brethren" Wilson withdrew his appeal.³² This was the most strenuous and most widely heralded of Wilson's controversies.

³¹ Extracts from the Minutes of Cincinnati Synod. Joshua L. Wilson Papers. Also C. Beecher, *Autobiography, Correspondence, Etc., of Lyman Beecher*, II, 358-59. 2 volumes, New York, 1864. Cf. *Trial and Acquittal of Lyman Beecher, D. D., before the Presbytery of Cincinnati, On Charges Preferred by Joshua L. Wilson, D. D.*, Published by Eli Taylor, Cincinnati, 1835.

³² J. L. W. to Sarah M. Wilson, May 31, 1836.

After thirty years in the ministry, Joshua L. Wilson was still a "Westminster Confession of Faith man."³³ The General Assembly of 1831 authorized the presbyteries in the Valley of the Mississippi to correspond with each other for the purpose of deciding how missions should be conducted in that section. This resulted in the calling of the Cincinnati Convention in November, 1831. The convention left the problem in much the same state of indecision, but increased the rivalry between the two missionary organizations, and between the two Schools. When an Old School brother expressed apprehension lest the New School should secede, Wilson responded by saying that his own fears were that they would not "go off."³⁴

A group of Old School elders and ministers, of whom Wilson was one, met in Butler County, Ohio, on the last day of July, 1833, for the purpose of deciding, "What ought to be done?" In a two-day session, the "Western Memorial" was prepared for the next General Assembly. Among other demands it requested that the Assembly should abrogate the Plan of Union and conduct its own missionary function. This document, with a circular letter signed by nineteen ministers and twenty-three elders, was sent among "those who love the doctrines and the discipline of our Church" for their approval and adoption.

The Assembly of 1834 was the third successive one to contain a New School majority; consequently, the position of the "Memorial" was nullified and the contrary affirmed. Following the adjournment of the Assembly, Wilson attended the meeting of Old School leaders in which the "Act and Testimony," drawn up by Robert J. Breckinridge, was signed by thirty-seven ministers and twenty-seven elders. This document was the successor of the "Western Memorial" and Wilson championed it in the West. It provided for an Old School convention to meet in Pittsburgh preceding the General Assembly which was to be held in that city in 1835. As the Assembly of 1835 contained an Old School majority, it proceeded to carry out the "reforms" specified in the "Act and Testimony." The next Assembly, however, was dominated by the New School and the acts of the previous year were reversed.

The Old School called another convention to convene in Philadelphia preceding the Assembly of 1837. As the As-

³³ John Howe to J. L. W., November 18, 1831.

³⁴ J. L. W. to James Blythe, July 9, 1833.

sembly of that year showed an Old School majority, it proceeded to enact the changes proposed by the convention. On the floor of the convention Wilson made the following statement:

I can hardly believe that anybody in the Convention has struggled more than I have in the controversies of the Church, or that anybody desires to be separated from those who are unsound more than I do.³⁵

His desire for separation "by decisive action" was realized, and in 1838 he had the pleasure of seeing the New School "go out" from the "elect." Throughout the struggle Wilson had been a stalwart force for the Old School in the West. In 1839 he was chosen moderator of the Old School Assembly. When he opened the Assembly of 1840 with a sermon he chose for his subject the "History of Heresies."

After the separation of the New School from the Old, Wilson was accused of being a pro-slavery minister, although in 1834 he had been called a "new-fledged Abolitionist."³⁶ In 1836 he wrote a congressman that "for the last thirty years I have had not a solitary doubt that slavery is alike unscriptural and unwise."³⁷ Yet in 1839 he saw fit to discourse for two successive Sundays on the "Relations and Duties of Servants and Masters."³⁸ When the matter of slavery was mentioned to him at the Old School Convention in 1837, Wilson decided to "let the Southern brethren manage their own concerns in their own way."³⁹ He never was an abolitionist; in 1836 he had expressed himself as being opposed to the "mistaken zeal" of the abolitionists on the one hand, and to the "violent measures" used against them on the other. His advice then was, "Oppose them both, but never admit for a moment that slavery is right or that the evil is incurable."⁴⁰ Favoring the eradication of slavery by legislative means was the position Wilson professed to hold throughout the period of his ministry in Cincinnati. Once this made him an advocate of emancipation, but with the rise of abolitionism he was practically forced into the camp of the apologists for slavery. He concluded that God

35 *The Western Presbyterian Herald*, Louisville, Ky., June 1, 1837.

36 Beecher, *op. cit.*, II, 356.

37 J. L. W. to Hon. B. Storer, January 21, 1836.

38 Published in pamphlet form, Cincinnati, 1839.

39 W. H. Foote, *Sketches of Virginia, Second Edition*, Philadelphia, 1856, p. 520.

40 J. L. W. to Hon. B. Storer, January 21, 1836.

"approves *slavery* as he does *war* as one mode of punishing sin in the world."⁴¹

Ecclesiastical controversies did not cause Wilson to neglect his first duty, that of ministering to the congregation of "God's elect" in Cincinnati. His quarterly report rendered on April 2, 1839, shows 98 visits, 12 lectures, 12 letters written, and 15 business meetings attended, besides the preparation of a thirty-page pamphlet for the press. In spite of ill health and poor eyesight for most of his life, he was a prodigious worker in the "Lord's vineyard," and continued to preach until three weeks before his death. In 1841 he delivered a sermon on the occasion of the death of President Harrison, whose home was at North Bend, Ohio, and who had once contributed toward Wilson's support in the days when both soldier and preacher were needed on the frontier. In the year that closed the battle of life for Wilson he wrote his son as follows:

I have a great desire to feel and act right about the war. But it is difficult. I consider the war as improvident and unjust, and yet I desire our government now that it is begun to conquer Mexico and open the way for the Gospel. . . .⁴²

"Open the way for the Gospel" might have been his motto.

Almost a century has passed since Wilson completed his career. His labors in support of Calvinism on the frontier made his life significant. He was probably the most able controversialist of the Old School in the Mississippi Valley. Certainly no more sincere or zealous minister lifted the standards of Presbyterianism in a western settlement. He found Cincinnati a village and left it a prosperous city. As an advocate of public education and social improvement, he exerted a continuous influence upon the growing community. At his death a local paper said that no man living in a large city had done more "in moulding its character."⁴³

41 J. L. W. to Rebecca C. Clopper, July 18, 1839.

42 J. L. W. to Samuel R. Wilson, May 23, 1846.

43 Quoted from the *Commercial Advertiser* by the *Presbyterian Herald*, Louisville, August 27, 1846.

